Men and Books

THE "SABRE-CUT INCISION" AND THE WHITE SHOULDER OF THE PELOPIDÆ

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There are many medical and surgical terms in common use today which have been taken from Greek or Roman legend, or even from ancient historical tradition, although some curious errors and variants have crept into the usage and nomenclature. The subject of this note, however, is not the discussion of any classical name as applied to a modern medical practice, but rather the identification of a comparatively modern surgical term with an ancient Greek myth. A scar resembling that resulting from the modern sabre-cut incision, as described by Codman,[1] appears to have been noticed in very early Greek times and to have been incorporated into Greek mythology.

This story, a gruesome one, best known in the case of the Thyestean Banquet, occurs in different forms, and is applied to various mythological characters in antiquity. It is a tale of shocking barbarity, in which, for reasons of vengeance or pride, the body of a child is dismembered and the flesh served as food, usually, although not invariably, to the father of the child. The horror of the myth is foreign to Greek classical tradition, and it is not surprising, therefore, to find an Oriental association with the earlier versions of the story. The myth may be sketched briefly in the form in which it seems to be of significance in connection with the "sabre-cut incision" of surgery.

Tantalus, a wealthy monarch whose kingdom is variously designated, and who was a favourite of the gods, once invited all the deities to a feast, and to provide an extraordinary banquet, slew his own son, Pelops, cut him to pieces, boiled the flesh, and served it to the gods. The guests being divine, were not deceived, and they pushed the proffered delicacy from them with repugnance. The goddess Demeter, however, whose daughter Persephone had recently been snatched away to Hades by Pluto, in the abstraction of grief at the loss of her own child, ate a piece of the flesh which proved to be a shoulder of Pelops.

Now, since Pelops was to reappear in later mythology as the settler of the lower part of Greece, the Peloponnesus, which bears his name to this day, it is clear that his career could not be thus terminated. The gods, therefore, ordered Hermes to put the mangled limbs of Pelops back into the cauldron and to restore the boy to his former condition. This Hermes was able to do, except for the shoulder that had been eaten by Demeter, and she repaired the deficiency by providing an ivory shoulder for him. Thereafter, the descendants of Pelops, the Pelopidæ, were believed to have one shoulder which shone with the dazzling whiteness of ivory.

There is no very obvious surgical tradition in connection with the ancient sources of this story, and yet, since most Greek myths rest on some rational basis, it would not be unreasonable to look for a simple and natural explanation of the ivory-white shoulder of the Pelopidæ. It has been suggested by an ancient critic[3] that Tantalus was a priest skilled in medicine, who, by surgical operation performed on his sick son Pelops, healed his shoulder, but left a scar, which continued to show the gleaming line of white where the flesh had healed. Since all tradition unites in making Tantalus the man who slaughtered his son, rather than the one who served him, it is somewhat difficult to follow an interpretation which casts Tantalus in the beneficent rôle of the healing surgeon. The suggestion, however, has value, and one may readily substitute the priest of Hermes or some other person as the surgeon. In fact there was an ancient tradition that Hermes was the father of Pelops.

One question remains and that is the nature of the wound and the operation. May it not have been a wound of the type which is, for obvious reasons, known in modern surgery as the "sabre-cut" approach?[4] In the days of sabre warfare a man, dodging to one side to avoid a slashing blow on the head, would receive it instead on the shoulder. The cut would extend straight across the shoulder, backward into the deltoid and supraspinatus muscle and forward into the anterior part of the deltoid, or even into the pectoralis major. If deep enough, as it often was, it would cut the acromion process entirely off the scapula and even shatter the clavicle. Such a wound would lay open the shoulder joint if it fell far enough laterally, and if it happened to fall closer to the neck it would divide the large vessels, and the patient, if not attended promptly, would bleed to death.

Such is a typical picture of a sabre-cut wound that might actually be received in battle. The operative technique follows almost the same line. An incision is carried through

the fibres of the deltoid muscle, through soft tissue, until the acromion process is reached. The acromion is then divided with a saw, and the deltoid muscles are turned laterally or peeled down over the side of the shoulder exposing the top of the capsule of the shoulder joint. In this way one obtains a good view and an excellent approach for certain types of operation. The operation, as Codman points out (p. 252), is less frequently practised than might be, since the extensive gleaming white scar may alarm the patient or lead to exaggerated claims for compensation.

The modern operation on the shoulder is a very detailed and intricate one, and it may be assumed that it would not lie within the skill of the contemporaries of Pelops. On the other hand. the characteristic sabre-cut on the shoulder was precisely the type of wound that would frequently occur in ancient warfare. To prove this it will suffice to cite the descriptions of two such wounds of the shoulder, one toward the side and the other close to the neck. These descriptions occur in Homer, whose date is earlier than any extant account of the Pelops legend. In the first place, Diomedes, fighting for the Greeks against the Trojans, smote Hyperion, "with his mighty sword on the clavicle beside the shoulder, and he severed the shoulder from the neck and the back (Iliad, II. V. 146-7). Again Telamonian Ajax, hurling his spear struck Archelochus "at the joining of the head and neck, on the last bone of the spine and severed both tendons" (Iliad, II. XIV. 465-6).

Examples might be multiplied, but these two incidents serve to indicate that the sabre-cut was familiar in the literature descriptive of the earliest Greek warfare. We have only to assume, therefore, that Pelops, receiving such a wound, was successfully tended by some skilful surgeon who may have been a priest of Hermes. The scar on his shoulder would in time become shining white as all scars do when the fibrous tissue contracts and squeezes out the blood vessels. Since such a sabre-cut in ancient battle would almost invariably be fatal, as were the wounds of both the Homeric heroes just mentioned, the recovery of Pelops and his subsequent appearance with a white scar on his shoulder would be something sufficiently remarkable to win for him a place in legend. It is impossible to be dogmatic without greater evidence, but this explanation at least affords a reasonable solution of a peculiar detail of the Greek myth.

Finally, one would like to believe that the legend of the mutilated child is Oriental, and that in Greece it was rationalized into the story of surgical healing or that the successful treatment of a sabre-cut received in battle was attached to this elaborate tale that was already known from eastern sources. There are certain objections to this way of escape. Tantalus is, for instance, sometimes identified as a king of Argos or Corinth in Greece, as well as of Lydia or of Sipylus in Phrygia or Paphlagonia. More serious, however, is the fact that the tale does not end with Tantalus. but is told again, in its best known form, in connection with the son of Pelops and grandson of Tantalus, Thyestes, whose own sons were killed by Atreus, his brother, and served up to him in the infamous Thyestean Banquet,[5] the setting of which is definitely Greek.

REFERENCES

1. CODMAN, E. A.: The Shoulder, Todd, Boston, 1934, p. 225.
2. ROSCHER: Ausführliches Lexikon der Griech. und Röm. Mythologie, *s.v.* Pelops, p. 1870; Smith: Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology, *s.v.* Pelops, sec. 1.
3. Schol. Lycophron, 152; see Preller-Robert, Griechische Mythologie, Berlin, 1920, II, p. 291, n.I *fin.*
4. *cf.* CODMAN, *op. cit.*, 251.
5. SMITH, *op. cit. s.v.* Atreus.

Association Notes

THE ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting held in Montreal from June 19th to 23rd may be ranked with former successes. Preparations to handle a large number of people naturally had to be on a large scale and entailed much thought on the part of numerous committees. These committees did their work well and deserve the thanks of the Association. Everything seemed to work smoothly. The attendance was gratifying—1,085 members, guests, interns and medical students being registered, besides nearly 600 wives and children. The weather also was propitious for the most part, the temperature being much more bearable than it often is in Montreal at this time of year. Only on the last day was there a deluge of rain which converted the Golf Tournament into something more resembling a game of water polo! The Windsor Hotel lent itself well to the occasion, though one could have wished that there had been more space available for the commercial and scientific exhibits, which were admirable. A good point was that eleven out of the twelve Sections of the Association were able to meet under the one roof, thus conserving time and energy. Only one Section, that of Historical Medicine, met elsewhere, and perhaps more appropriately, in the Osler Library at McGill University.

Our thanks are very specially due to our guests, whose efforts on our behalf were highly appreciated—to Sir Arthur MacNalty, Chief Medical Officer, Ministry of Health, Great Britain, for his informative luncheon talk on